

Idaho has real potential for wind power development

By Michael Keckler, Public Information Officer, Idaho Department of Water Resources

As Southern Idaho's dwindling water supply continues to cause heartache across the region, there is one very plentiful resource that is only beginning to be tapped.

Bob Lewandowski was the first to recognize the potential more than 30 years ago after watching his father's crops and topsoil blow away year after year. The farm is located in Elmore County between Mountain Home and Boise. Lewandowski knew there had to be a way to harness the ever-menacing wind.

In October 2002, after Idaho Power Company agreed to purchase power he produced, Lewandowski raised Idaho's first commercial wind turbine. Today, there are three turbines on his farm, each standing 15 stories tall. Combined, they churn out enough electricity to supply the needs of 66 average Idaho homes.

The Idaho Energy Division also recognized Idaho's wind power potential early on and in 2002, received a federal grant to conduct wind assessments throughout the state. Idaho ranks 13th in the nation for wind power potential and utility companies serving the southern part of the state are making plans to include more wind generated electricity in their portfolios. For instance, Idaho Power Company is soliciting bids to build 200 megawatts of wind power over the next two years.

Idaho's second commercial wind farm went on line earlier this year. Fossil Gulch wind farm outside Hagerman is a utility scale facility capable of generating 10.5 megawatts of power. Developed by Exergy Development Group of Idaho, this wind farm on the south bluff of the Snake River is something to behold. The seven massive turbines, each standing 262 feet tall with 123-foot long blades are visible for miles around. But even more impressive is the amount of electricity they can produce. Rated at 1.5-megawatts the Fossil Gulch turbines can each power about 350 homes. Combined, the farm's seven turbines can supply electricity to about 2450 homes.

Exergy Development is already making plans to build four more wind farms of equal size nearby, meaning in the near future, 52.5 megawatts of electricity – enough to

power nearly 12,250 homes – could be generated by wind turbines in the Hagerman area alone. And it doesn't stop there. 11 different wind power projects are in the planning stages from near Boise, all the way to Idaho Falls. Early estimates put the combined generating capacity from these proposed projects at about 750 megawatts, enough power for about 175,000 homes annually!

But you don't have to be a proprietor of a big wind farm to profit from Idaho's wind. Net metering is one way many alternative energy operators are cutting their electricity costs. Using small-scale wind turbines, or in some cases solar panels, some folks are actually able to make their electricity meters run backwards by generating their own power!

The Idaho Legislature has created an incentive to make wind power generation more attractive for developers big and small. House Bill 110 provides a sales tax exemption for equipment purchases creating a tax break the bill's supporters say will help more wind projects become reality. As of this writing, the bill had cleared both Houses and is waiting consideration by the Governor.

This is an exciting time for wind power development in Idaho. If you're interested, the Idaho Energy Division has the expertise and resources you need to harness a share of Idaho's wind. Visit our website: www.idahowind.org

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